



What Is The Purpose Of Winter Play?

By Adam Moeller, agronomist, Northeast Region

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Many golfers will argue that winter play has virtually no impact on putting green health and that greens should be available for use throughout the year. This is an argument that superintendents and course officials often face this time of year as the pressure builds to keep the greens open. Putting green damage from traffic stress may occur when frost is present, and often results in tee time delays in the autumn/spring. Traffic on frozen greens has less potential for significant permanent damage (i.e. compaction, severe foot rutting), but it is important to remember that turf thinning is common because recovery at this time of year is unlikely, so damage is cumulative until growth resumes in the spring. If frozen greens thaw during the day, however, golfer traffic may cause shearing of the upper profile (the thawed layer) from the still frozen soil below, which could severely compromise turf health and future playability. As such, closing the greens on days when thawing is possible is recommended. Unfortunately, the moderate temperatures needed for thawing frozen greens are enticing for winter play by golfers, which obviously compounds the pressure to keep the greens open. This leaves us at a crossroad. Do what's best for the turf or what's best for the golfers? The answer is undeniably do what is best for the turf!

If winter play is a controversial topic at your facility I urge you to ask the following question. What is the purpose of winter play? I doubt golfers want to compromise turf health or future playability. Instead, winter play allows golfers to work on their swing, get outdoors, and stay active and exercise. It is nearly impossible for the maintenance staff to prepare the course, much less the greens, to a high quality level with smooth, consistent surfaces during the winter months, which most golfers (hopefully) understand. That being said, it is unlikely that golfers are trying to shoot their low round of the year or fine tune their putting stroke. In the Northeast, scores are not posted for handicap purposes in the winter. Therefore, well planned temporary greens can accommodate equal

playability for golfers while providing them all of the previously mentioned benefits. More importantly, temporary greens virtually eliminate the potential for traffic stress on the putting greens, so eliminating winter traffic on greens leaves them in better shape for the prime season when conditions count most.

The argument for closing the greens during the winter months is the same for every course in the Northeast. The decision is ultimately up to superintendent and course officials. Nonetheless, ask yourself the following question. What is the purpose of winter play at our course and can we accommodate those golfers without compromising putting green health and future playability with temporary greens? My hope is the answer is YES!

Northeast Region Agronomists:

David A. Oatis, regional director – doatis@usga.org

James E. Skorulski, senior agronomist – jskorulski@usga.org

Adam Moeller, agronomist – amoeller@usga.org

Elliott Dowling, agronomist – edowling@usga.org

Addison Barden, agronomist – abarden@usga.org

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